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# EARLY CULTURES ALONG THE FRONT RANGE:

A window into the past



Arapaho and Roosevelt  
National Forests  
and  
Pawnee National  
Grassland



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## HELPING TO PRESERVE AMERICA'S PAST

The Forest Service has had responsibility for managing the resources on National Forest System lands for over a hundred years. Some resources such as timber, minerals, and recreation are familiar and are managed under the principles of multiple use. The Forest Service also has a role in managing those resources, called "cultural resources," that are evidence of human prehistory and history -- the human use of National Forests and Grasslands.

The Forest Service employs anthropologists, archeologists, historians, and cultural resource technicians to reclaim information from some prehistoric and historic sites, to preserve others, and to interpret our heritage for the public. Much of the work is done through contracting with universities and museums.

Visitors to federal lands play an important part in protecting cultural resources. In recent years, there has been a growing national interest in our country's heritage. By law, artifacts may not be removed from federal land without permission. Preservation laws also apply to fossil remains, as well as to evidence of human occupation.

What is the importance of cultural resources? When they are studied in place with proper archeologic techniques, much information about the past can be obtained. An understanding of our past leads to better understanding of our present and wiser planning for our future. Continued study helps confirm or adjust current theories about early people and fills in missing details about early times. Study of remains of the historical period gives a more complete picture than relying only on written records.

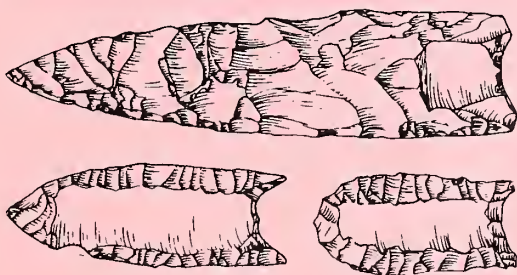
## THE EARLY PEOPLE OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN AND GRASSLAND REGION

Who were the earliest peoples in northern Colorado and how did they live? The story begins thousands of years ago and thousands of miles away. It will help us understand the significance of cultural resources, if we view them in total perspective. The picture started to be painted when Asian hunters were able to cross the Bering Strait between Siberia and Alaska. Archeologists have long been able to demonstrate that humans have lived in the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains for more than 11,000 years. Many archeologists speculate that humans were here even earlier.

The Bering Strait crossing was possible during the last Ice Age, which ended some 11,000 years ago. The Ice Age environment was very different from that of today. The climate was wetter and much cooler, so much so that heavy rainfall and snow were locked up in ice. The

result was a drop in the sea level that created a "land bridge" about 1,000 miles wide between what are now Siberia and Alaska. Many Ice Age (Pleistocene) mammals, including the now-extinct mammoth, giant bison, ground sloth and early horse and camel, crossed that ice free corridor to this continent, followed by the hunters. When the ice sheets began to melt at the end of the Pleistocene era, sea levels rose, returning the New World to isolation.

Although the earliest inhabitants of this region, known as Paleoindians, undoubtedly relied to a great extent on plants and small game for food, they left spectacular evidence of their hunting of large game. Butchered skeletal remains of mammoth and giant bison have been found in numerous early sites on the plains. Since mammoths became extinct on the continent perhaps 11,000 years ago, the evidence verifies human occupation here that long ago. Several species of giant bison remained for a few more thousand years as the landscape gradually became warmer and drier, and continued to serve as a food source for the Paleoindians.



**Selected Paleoindian points from Colorado**

Their principal weapons were spears tipped with large well-crafted stone blades, which were either thrust by hand or aided by a special spear-thrower called an atlatl. These distinctive Paleoindian points are sometimes found lying among butchered skeletons of these massive prehistoric creatures. The projectile points have been given names such as Clovis, Folsom, Hell Gap, Scottsbluff, and Eden. They are usually named after the place the first examples of different styles of points were found.

Changes in lifestyles have occurred over time relating to major climate changes and technological advances. Scientists believe one such change occurred between 7,000 and 4,500 years ago when the land was at its warmest and driest during a climatic episode named the Altithermal. The already-dry western prairies were especially impacted by this condition. Ice Age mammals were now extinct. The early nomadic foragers turned more to vigorous small game hunting, along with seed and other plant gathering.





**An R. Farrington drawing of atlatl use  
(from *The Archaeology of Colorado*)**

How do people respond to major changes in conditions? Archeologic evidence suggests that the occupants of this Archaic cultural period hardly skipped a beat as they adapted to the changes. The land that is now administered by the Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests apparently played a significant role in human adaptation during the Altithermal. The plains became warmer and drier, while the mountains remained cooler and wetter. The Front Range was among many high altitude localities that invited increased seasonal human visitation, as a relief from the dry heat and limited food sources below.

Over the next few thousand years, called the Early, Middle and Late Archaic periods, it appears that these hunter-gatherers became adjusted to local conditions. Population numbers increased, and groups that we recognize as early American Indian tribes began to form. Archaic projectile points became smaller, and often had notches along their bases (a new invention) to facilitate attachment to atlatl-propelled spear shafts.



**Selected Archaic points from Colorado**

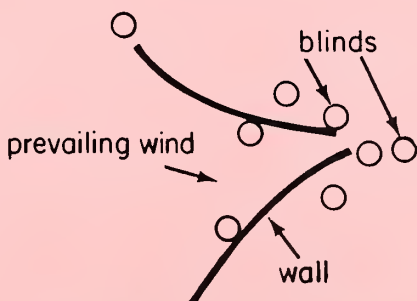
There is evidence that about 2,000 years ago there was a movement of ideas and people from the Mississippi Valley area Woodland culture. A gradual diffusion brought the use of pottery, domesticated food plants (corn, beans and squash), and the bow and arrow. Farming did not become a major practice on the arid northeastern Colorado prairies until modern times, but the bow and arrow replaced the atlatl and throwing spear as implement of choice for the region's hunters. Small side-notched and corner-notched points abound in areas they inhabited.



**Selected Woodland points from Colorado**

The higher elevations of the Front Range have retained evidence of human presence since Paleoindian times. As time passed, the area was more heavily exploited. During the Archaic and Woodland periods, complex hunting systems were used that required significant coordination and timing. Remains of substantial walls and hunting blinds (pits) have been recorded at over 40 localities near the Continental Divide. These sites, called game drives, proved successful for hunting elusive and wary bighorn sheep, as well as other large game such as elk and deer.

People around the world have, at times, used natural terrain and constructed walls to guide game into traps. On the plains, the ends of the drives often ended with an abrupt and sheer drop that heavy bison, carried by momentum, could not avoid. In the alpine tundra of Colorado's Front Range, the system is different, likely a reflection of the species sought. The game drive walls lie in a "V" arrangement, to funnel approaching game uphill and downwind toward the narrow end. Generally, the closer to the end of the "V," the more hunting blinds there are that have been dug into the rocky tundra landscape. Hunters would shoot arrows at the panicked sheep when they came past the blinds.



**Plan of a typical Front Range game drive**

## **APPROACHING MODERN TIMES**

The historic period of Colorado begins in the 1600s when the first Europeans crossed what later became the political boundaries of the state. By that time the native human populations were not the same as the original mammoth hunters with Siberian blood fresh in their veins.

The prairies saw a succession of cultures during the next few centuries, including the Apache, Comanche, Arapaho and Cheyenne tribes. The mountains were generally the domain of the Utes. It was during this time that the modern horse was acquired from the Spanish, which brought a number of significant changes. By the 1870s, most of the native American Indians who survived the westward expansion of pioneering Euro-Americans were no longer able to defend the land, and they were relegated to reservations.

The early 19th century journals of traders, trappers and explorers describe the rich natural resources of the region. When gold was discovered, thousands of people were drawn to the area with its promise of riches. Forts were established to protect immigrants from the original inhabitants of the land. Mining camps and towns sprung up overnight. The Homestead Act opened the eastern prairies and the mountain valleys for settlement. Railroads and other corporations owned much of the timbered slopes of the mountains.

Since the early part of this century, the Forest Service has played a major role in the history of the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain states. In 1908, portions of federal forest reserves were combined to form the Arapaho National Forest. The Colorado National Forest was designated in 1910 and later renamed to commemorate Theodore Roosevelt. The Pawnee National Grassland was established in 1960.

In the 1930's, the Forest Service was involved in the economic recovery of the nation with the establishment of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Cabins, centers, roads, and dams built by the CCC can be seen on many Ranger Districts even today; some of these are still in use by the Forest Service.

## **CULTURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT**

The mood of the nation is reflected in federal cultural resource laws and policies which direct federal agencies to locate and inventory all historic and archeological sites under their stewardship. The president, through Executive Order 11593, also enjoins federal agencies to nominate to the National Register of Historic Places all historic and prehistoric sites that have or might yield important information in history or prehistory.



The Forest Service has developed a professional cultural resources staff to handle such matters, and this group continues to gather information related to the history and prehistory of the land under USDA Forest Service management.

The Rocky Mountain and Great Plains Region of the National Forest System has within its boundaries ample evidence of over 11,000 years of our cultural heritage. This rich and varied background has only been outlined here. Only as material culture remains from this heritage are located, recorded, and evaluated will the history and cultural processes involved be understood. Once damaged, destroyed, or modified, cultural resource sites or artifacts are of little value.

Cultural resources include ruins, old buildings, ancient walls, pottery, arrow points, and other artifacts. To protect these resources held in public trust, their locations are to be kept confidential. Collecting or disturbing archeological or historic remains on National Forest System Lands is prohibited without written permission under terms of the Federal Antiquities Act of 1906, and the Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979. It is impossible for the Forest Service to protect this resource without your help.

**As Abraham Lincoln once said: "A country with no regard for its past will have little worth remembering in the future."**

For further reading about the archeology of the Front Range, you may consult:

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1985 Arapaho Pass: Glacial Geology and Archeology at the Crest of the Colorado Front Range. *Center for Mountain Archeology, Research Report No. 3*. Ward, CO

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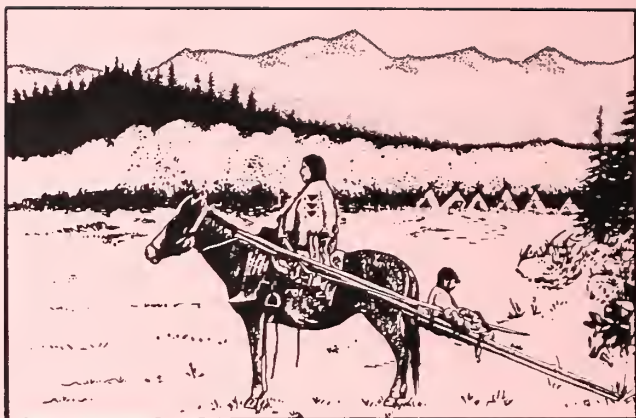
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1983 *The Archaeology of Colorado*. Johnson Books.

Metcalf, Michael D., and Kevin D. Black  
1991 Archaeological Excavations at the Yarmony Pit House Site, Eagle County, Colorado. *Bureau of Land Management, Colorado. Cultural Resource Series*, N. 31.



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